



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**FROM FACTORY TO STUDIO:
PROVIDENCE STEEL AND IRON LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

An industrial complex in the Valley neighborhood of Providence has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture and industry. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the Providence Steel and Iron Company Complex to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Providence Steel and Iron is important both as a local example of a structural steel and ornamental iron works and as a very early industrial building designed to use electricity, not hydraulic or steam power, to operate its machinery.

The Providence Steel and Iron Company Complex (PS&I) is a group of one- and two-story, predominantly brick industrial buildings located on a three-acre lot at the corner of Sims and Kinsley avenues south of the Woonasquatucket River. The site includes the original structural steel building (which housed the office, pattern room, and drafting rooms), an ornamental iron building, a bar shop, a maintenance shed, and a detached office building. These buildings are arranged around the periphery of a central yard served by a series of steel gantries and cranes and a narrow gauge rail that

allowed for the manipulation of materials, stock, and fabricated structures and for transport into the various buildings.

Providence Steel and Iron Company (PS&I) was created as a subsidiary of Builders Iron Foundry (BIF), a Providence company established in 1822. BIF manufactured precision iron castings, water meters, and architectural ironwork in a plant downtown. New contracts and space constraints allowed the company to purchase about 20,000 square feet of land at the corner of Sims and Kinsley Avenues for its Structural and Architectural Department. This offshoot of BIF was incorporated as Providence Steel and Iron (PS&I) and purchased by Michael F. Houlihan in 1905.

The Providence construction firm of Houlihan and Maguire designed and erected a building to house a structural steel shop on the first floor and an office, pattern room, and drafting room on the second. PS&I's Structural Steel Building represented a significant innovation in that it was designed for electrical illumination and power. The movement toward electric drive in American factories had been developing throughout the 1890s. With the expansion of the local electrical grid in the 1890s and the early years of the 20th century, factories were able to choose either to tie in to the grid or to generate electricity at a local steam plant.

In researching the National Register nomination for Providence Steel & Iron, preservation consultant Edward Connors investigated documentary evidence and the physical plant. Scanning the early plans for PS&I, Connors found no indication of a boiler or engine/dynamo room; this suggested that electrical needs were furnished by Narragansett Electric Lighting Company. On site, he found a combination of local motors dedicated to individual machines and some local shafting and belting. The early system of gantries and cranes in the rear yard of PS&I suggests the company began its rear-yard operation with hand-operated cranes and chainfalls. Considering the rapid development of electrical materials-handling equipment in the early 20th century, Connors claims that it is likely that PS&I acquired electrically-driven cranes and hoists early on.

By 1906 PS&I was advertising locally for “designs and estimates for buildings, bridges,

trusses, girders, built-up columns, etc. Also stairs, fences, railings, window guards, grillwork, and general blacksmith and household work.” The company also stocked steel beams, channels, angles, tees, and plates. By 1918, PS&I had acquired enough land to extend its system of cranes and to construct three buildings: the Ornamental Iron Works Building (1918 –21), Office Building (1921-26), and the Bar Shop (1926-37). Another land purchase enabled the firm to install the stockyard crane and build the final extension of the Ornamental Iron Works.

Providence Steel & Iron continued operations without interruption until economic conditions forced its closure in 2003. At that time William King, who had run the plant since 1980, sold the complex to the Steel Yard, an industrial arts center for artists, entrepreneurs, tradespeople, and the community. One hundred years after it was established, PS&I remains in use for steel fabrication and ornamental ironwork with facilities for blacksmithing and welding, as well as bronze casting, ceramics, and glass.

According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, “Rhode Island has a long history of metal workers and artisans who literally made the infrastructure of the Industrial Revolution. At Providence Steel and Iron this heritage of industrial arts lives on in historic buildings and in creative artists who work at the Steel Yard.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning for Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed in the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is the state agency responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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